

# Reconceptualising childhood: Children's rights and youth participation in schools

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*Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child holds that young people have a right to participate in matters affecting them. While all members of the United Nations have ratified the Convention (with the exception of the United States and Somalia), there are numerous challenges associated with implementing the participatory principle in schools. In response to some of these challenges, this paper examines how western conceptions of childhood, which associate the child with innocence and dependence, have worked to undermine youth participation in the school environment. It explores alternative understandings of children as put forth by child liberationist theorists and international commitments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, it calls upon schools to re-evaluate their hierarchical structure in order to uphold the participatory rights of children.*

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, participatory rights, social construction of childhood, child liberationist theory, school hierarchy

## AN INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPATORY RIGHTS IN SCHOOLS

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) is an international legal instrument that outlines a specific body of identifiable rights for children. One of its guiding principles, age-appropriate participation, holds that young people have the right to express their views in matters affecting them (Article 12). While all members of the United Nations have ratified the Convention (with the exception of the United States and Somalia), there is still a great deal of controversy surrounding the participatory principle. Critics argue that children do not possess the emotional or cognitive capabilities needed to make rational choices (Purdy, 1992). Following from this, they believe that adults should paternalistically choose for children. While the Convention seeks to challenge this ideology by granting children the right to participate in the decision-making process, its application has been somewhat unsuccessful. For example, in institutions that are responsible for the socialisation of young people, such as schools, educational officials are still not required to share power with youth (Bickmore, 2001). Consequently, the voices of children are often excluded from the decisions that take place in the school environment. Although such educational practices are often carried out with the intention of protecting children, at the same time they may also violate their right to participate in decisions that affect them.

In light of this problem, the purpose of this paper is to explore some of the assumptions we have about children and their ability to make rational decisions. To this end, this paper first discusses how the social construction of childhood within western societies has resulted in the creation of an immature and dependent representation of young people. As we see, the conception of childhood that we hold as natural may actually be a result of certain historical and social factors. The next section examines alternative understandings of childhood as put forth by child liberationist theorists and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It demonstrates that children may have the ability to make thoughtful choices and thus, should be given greater opportunities to

influence the decision-making process. Last, this paper argues that school practices often overlook the ability of children to engage in autonomous reflection. Consequently, educational institutions have largely neglected to harmonise their policies with the participatory principle embodied in the Convention. In summary, an examination of the aforementioned areas reveals that the dominant conception of childhood in western societies can sometimes undermine the ability of young people to participate in institutions such as schools. Despite efforts to guarantee children greater autonomy, through international legal instruments such as the Convention, educators still exercise a disproportionate amount of control over children. If schools are to respect and uphold the participatory rights of youth, educational officials need to provide young people with greater opportunities to influence the decisions that take place within the school environment.

### **THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD IN WESTERN SOCIETIES**

In exploring the nature of children and their ability to act as social actors capable of engaging in autonomous reflection, one of the most crucial places to commence is with an overview of the social construction of childhood. Scholars such as Freeman (1998) have articulated the need to merge child rights discourse and sociological research in the area of child studies given that these disciplines possess overlapping interests and congruent understandings of children. In particular, sociological arguments in relation to the social construction of childhood provide a great deal of clarity in unravelling some of the assumptions that we have about the nature of children. Such research is pivotal for taking the child rights debate forward, especially in relation to the right of children to participate in the decision-making process, because it allows us to determine the extent to which child autonomy could be justified within the context of sociological findings. While there are several points of interest that could be pursued for the purposes of such a discussion, perhaps one of the most practical approaches involves an overview of how conceptions of childhood are both socially and historically situated. This allows us not only to see how childhood has changed and evolved over time but also to challenge the notion that childhood is a static concept. With this in mind, the work of Philippe Ariès provides a starting point for understanding the dynamic nature of childhood as both an ideological and social construct.

The most significant contribution from Ariès (1962) stems from his argument that childhood was not regarded as an important stage in life during the middle ages. Although few records from this period provide detailed accounts about the lives of children, Ariès is able to argue this point by drawing upon historical evidence such as artistic representations of children. For example, in his seminal work *Centuries of Childhood*, Ariès shows that in a French miniature of the late eleventh century children were merely painted as small characters who possessed the expressions and features of adults. Moreover, he notes that literary historians, such as Mgr Calve, have shown that in the epic child prodigies behaved with the strength and courage of warriors. Based on the notion that children were often represented with adult-like characteristics, he concludes that during the medieval period people did not possess a distinct image for children. This suggests that the separation between child and adult worlds that is commonplace within modern societies may not have existed to the same extent in previous centuries.

Ariès also argues that an affection for children may have been somewhat lacking. This point is indicated by the fact that the life expectancy of the child was considerably low. Given that people would not become too attached to something that was regarded as a probable loss, Ariès believes there was a general indifference or callousness expressed toward children. Although he acknowledges that religious iconography may have shown a somewhat sentimental view of children as early as the twelfth century, this sentimental realism did not extend into lay works until the sixteenth century. However, even during the latter period the child was not portrayed alone but rather was always situated with others. It was not until the seventeenth century that art

started to give children a distinct place. Ariès believes that this represents the beginnings of a more idealised and affectionate image of children.

The work of Ariès has been extremely significant not only in examining historical images of childhood, but also in contesting the notion that childhood is a natural phenomenon. When we consider that previous centuries did not possess a distinct image of childhood in artistic representations, we might expand this understanding to society at large and conclude that childhood itself was not present as an ideological construct. However, before we can make this claim, it is important to note that not all scholars agree with his conclusions. For example, Cunningham (1995) argues that the varying pictorial representations of children throughout the centuries merely tell us about changes in art and not the way in which childhood was perceived by people. Moreover, Cunningham also shows that the medieval world not only recognised *infantia* (the first seven years of life) as a significant and separate stage but that religious writings also urged mothers to bring up their children with kindness. This not only demonstrates that medieval society may have had affection for children but that there was also a clear concept of childhood based upon age.

While Ariès does not completely dismiss the notion that medieval society may have had some recognition of the characteristics of childhood, he maintains that childhood was not valued, given that artistic works did not have a distinct place for them. However, more recent scholarship shows that there was an appreciation for the young as evidenced by writings from the sixth century, which clearly mourn the loss of children (Cunningham, 1995). Indeed, there is mounting evidence that indicates that childhood was regarded as a separate and important stage during the medieval period. Therefore, contemporary scholarship shows that the Ariès thesis, namely that the separation of child and adult worlds did not emerge until the seventeenth century, cannot be fully sustained (Cunningham, 1995).

Although the above discussion suggests that Ariès may have been somewhat flawed in his assumptions, scholars such as Archard (1993) provide a useful way of restating the conclusions that can be derived from his work. First, it is important to draw a distinction between the meaning of a concept and a conception. For example, Archard argues that to have a concept of childhood merely means to recognise that children differ from adults. Certainly, this was the case in the medieval period as there was a clear language to distinguish various stages in life such as *infantia* and *pueritia* (Cunningham, 1995). Even though Ariès shows that there were similarities between children and adults that we do not see today, such as the inclination for children and adults to be glad in similar garments, this does not prove that earlier societies lacked a concept of childhood – they merely lacked our concept (Archard, 1993). In comparison, Archard shows that a conception outlines a particular view of the characteristics that make adults and children different. For example, in past centuries people did not always believe children should be kept innocent of sexual knowledge (Shahar, cited in Cunningham, 1995). Indeed, this differs from present-day conceptions of childhood in many western societies whereby children are often protected from such information. With this in mind, Ariès helps us to see that conceptions of childhood have somewhat transformed.

Based on the notion that conceptions of childhood are socially and historically situated, we would be wise to consider the more recent roots of our own treatment and perception of children. To this end, it is crucial that we understand the impact of literary works in shaping the attributes that we ascribe to the young. For example, during the eighteenth century, Rousseau presented a new understanding of childhood in his seminal work *Emile* which emphasised the natural goodness of children. Unlike previous centuries that saw children as adults in the making, Rousseau argued that childhood was a stage in life to be valued in and of itself. This idea was expanded by Romantic writers such as Blake who argued that childhood was a source of innocence, and also by

Wordsworth who saw great virtues in the child (Hendrick, 1997). These representations are significant because they demonstrate the beginnings of a new understanding of children – one that clearly defines the characteristics of their separate and unique nature. Although this ideology was somewhat lost with the rise of industrialisation and the placement of children as factory workers, it was later revived by welfare reformers to challenge this very practice. For instance, during the child labour debates that took place from 1780-1840 in Britain, reformers drew upon the Romantic and Rousseauian ideal arguing that factory work was an unnatural practice for such young and innocent members of society. These debates have largely influenced and shaped present-day conceptions of childhood, which hold that children should be protected from the harsh realities of the adult world (Hendrick, 1997).

The protectionist ideology that became prominent in the late eighteenth century laid the groundwork for the implementation of mass education. Following from this, the government was able to create a homogenised construction of childhood that was enforced by schools. For example, Hendrick (1997) notes that schools ignored the knowledge that children derived from outside influences and, instead, favoured a complete state of ignorance. In addition, they demanded a certain standard of behaviour that was often upheld using physical force. This deference to authority that was expected of school children reinforced their vulnerability and dependence. Moreover, the institutionalisation of children not only deepened their distinct place in society but also was an attempt to keep them innocent and pure by removing them from the austere factory setting. Hendrick argues that the school was able to impose this vision of childhood upon children because it had legal authority to demand their attendance. In other words, the school was an unavoidable institution that was used to shape and mould the docile behaviour and innocent character of its pupils.

The protection of childhood reached its height during the twentieth century when political parties started to place children as a top priority on their agendas, noting that children were the key to the future. Cunningham (1995) believes that this was largely a result of the international rivalry between states during this period. For instance, children were regarded as the most valuable asset of a nation and therefore, its future strength and power depended upon their proper development. Accordingly, governments began to draft policies and laws securing greater services for the child. This helped to make the dominant conception of childhood even more coherent and pervasive, and also created a vulnerable, innocent and dependent image of children (Hendricks, 1997).

Although the image of children has somewhat evolved since the nineteenth century, Stasiulis (2002) shows that contemporary practices regarding children still reflect the dominant ideology from this period. For instance, she argues that the nineteenth century conception of childhood emphasised the innocence and frailty of children. This conception has profoundly shaped and limited their ability to participate as active citizens today because children are still believed to lack the wisdom and competence to make their own decisions. In other words, the mere fact that children are excluded from the political sphere is testament to the fact that society still views them as dependent upon adults and the state.

More recently, scholarship regarding the 'end of childhood' has charged the media with adultifying children (Medved 1998 and Postman, 1982 cited in Stasiulis, 2002). Although this may be somewhat true given that children have greater access to the adult world through media such as television and the internet, there are still several aspects of their existence that remain unchanged. For instance, schools still play a role as one of the dominant socialising forces in their lives. Moreover, with international movements to universalise primary schooling, the school is an institution that still retains tremendous amount of influence and control. In the Canadian context, recent legal decisions that permit teachers and parents to use minor corrective force on children also restricts their autonomy rights and renders them somewhat vulnerable to authority. This is not

to suggest that conceptions of childhood have not evolved since the nineteenth century. However, it is important to note that children are still not, to a large extent, treated as legal subjects but rather as objects that require protection, thus causing them to be viewed as the mere property of their parents and the state (Stasiulis, 2002).

The above discussion offers a historical sketch of the social construction of childhood in western societies. Certainly, this topic is a very complex and much debated area of interest, and this examination does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject. Moreover, it would be unfair to suggest that all western societies have the same conception, although there are some dominant themes that seem to pervade our understanding. However, what our discussion does highlight is that the institutionalised concept of childhood has been very much influenced by factors such as industrialisation, welfare reform, government policies and mass schooling. Although conceptions of childhood have somewhat shifted, of great interest is the notion that most societies have recognised it as a distinct and separate stage in life. Furthermore, scientific findings seem to validate this separation, showing that there are both cognitive and developmental differences between children and adults (Stasiulis, 2002).

Certainly, we cannot deny that children possess some distinguishing features, yet we also must be aware that how we respond to their differences has varied over time. For example, during both the medieval and modern period, children were immersed into the workforce at a young age. This does not mean that adults did not recognise the distinct nature of youth, but it does show that children were believed to have the ability to participate in the adult world. While mass schooling sought to provide children with greater opportunities to develop their cognitive capabilities, it also created a separate space for children. This space organised itself as an authoritative structure where adults were responsible for enforcing a standard of behaviour and choosing the daily activities of children. In other words, the school reinforced the notion that children should have a distinct place in society that is controlled by adults. Arguably, this has resulted in a conception of childhood that constructs the child as a vulnerable object in need adult guidance and protection. However, if we conclude that childhood is social construct that has varied over time, we might want to question if an authoritative treatment of children recognises and cultivates their true capacities. As discussed below, there are several arguments that indicate that children are not afforded the amount of autonomy necessary for their success and development.

### **RECONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHILD RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a dominant image of childhood was universalised with the introduction of mass schooling and new laws that sought to provide children with greater protection. As previously noted, this resulted in a more sentimental view of children that emphasised their innocence and vulnerability. However, with the rise of feminism and other movements that sought to emancipate humanity, people also began to question the institution of childhood. For example, Archard (1993) points out that in the late 1960s feminists argued that the subordinate role of women was not indicative of their female nature, but rather it was a result of patriarchal influences. Moreover, feminists showed that the notion that women were weak, emotional and dependent was a social construct that was used in the justification of their oppression. This argument was later applied to our understanding of children by child liberationist theorists, such as Holt and Farson, who argued that the vulnerable and helpless image that we ascribed to children was unrepresentative of their true nature. In other words, given that childhood itself was a social construct, we could not assume that childishness was necessarily a biological trait. The child liberationist argument, which gained momentum in the 1970s, sought to reinvent our understanding of children and emancipate them from their helpless state.

In highlighting the oppressive nature of childhood, child liberationists make several observations about our treatment and expectations of children. Some of the most notable are put forth by Holt (1974), a pioneer of the child liberationist movement. First, he discusses the notion that children are considered to be incompetent and argues that this may be somewhat of a self-confirming ideology. To illustrate this point, he draws our attention to the Japanese musician Suzuki who taught young children how to play violin with great proficiency. He compares this to American pre-school programs where children often form rhythm bands in which they are required to play bells and cymbals and merely mimic the rhythm that the teacher plays for them. Although Americans are often astonished by the magnificent musical talent that Suzuki's students possess, Holt reminds us that these Japanese children are not considered to be prodigies within their own society, but rather they represent the norm. In other words, when we place high expectations upon children they will often rise to the challenge and develop great skills and capacities. By the same token, if we view children as being incompetent, they too may be socialised into viewing themselves in this manner and, as a consequence, their learning will be dramatically stifled.

Holt also argues that children often feel an inclination to escape from the institution of childhood. For example, in a classroom discussion he conducted at a high school in America, he asked the students if they could legally live away from home, how many would actually consider this option. All students raised their hands with great enthusiasm. Holt argues that this is indicative of their desire to be seen and treated as adults rather than as children. Moreover, while we often have the tendency to view childhood as a garden that protects children from the outside world, Holt believes that many young people experience their childhood not as a garden but as a prison from which they want to escape. Therefore, he believes that our traditional view of childhood may be somewhat oppressive as it denies children opportunities to exercise their autonomy and cultivate their true capacities.

The arguments developed by Holt were instrumental in the child liberationist movement, and later became a foundation upon which people advocated for the equal rights of children. For example, child liberationists argued that children needed to emancipate themselves from the oppressive institution of childhood. To this end, they believed that children should not only be provided with welfare rights (which had largely already been secured for them) but also agency rights, such as the right to vote and work. While they acknowledged that agency rights would require an ability to make rational choices, and indeed not all children possess this capacity, the same could be said of adults. In other words, liberationists felt that categories of meaning such as 'child' and 'adult' provided an arbitrary measure of one's capacity for autonomous reflection. Moreover, they believed that children were members of a society, and therefore they should be able to shape and influence its organisation. Accordingly, they argued that children should have their voices considered equally in the formation of laws and social policy (Dwyer, 1998). In essence, child liberationists sought to overturn the dominant ideology that equated children with incompetence and helplessness in order to help them realise their full potential and become more independent at an earlier stage in life.

Although the child liberationist argument has been considered and debated within scholarship over the past thirty years, its application has been less successful. For instance, children still do not possess the right to vote in most countries, and unquestionably there is still a clear separation between children and adults whether it is shown explicitly through the clothes they wear or implicitly through institutions such as schools that shelter children from the outside world. However, with that said, there has also been an international movement to secure greater autonomy rights for children. For example, in 1989 the United Nations general assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. On the one hand, this international legal instrument is still very much a protectionist document, as it calls upon states to secure services for young people, such as a minimum standard of health care and education. On the other hand, the

document is also extremely emancipating as it is the first legal instrument to grant participatory rights for children.

As previously noted, article 12 of the Convention states that young people have a right to participate in matters that affect them according to their age and level of maturity. Certainly, this does not provide children with all the rights that were articulated by child liberationists. However, it does draw upon this philosophy to a certain extent as it recognises children as having the capacity to make meaningful decisions (Stasiulis, 2002). Although most members of the United Nations have ratified the Convention, the majority of these states have been reluctant to adopt domestic policies that make youth participation a reality. For instance, few states provide structures that allow children to voice their concerns in government, and in the institutions that are responsible for nurturing children, such as schools, young people are usually not provided with representation on decision-making bodies. Arguably, this is largely because the notion that children have the capacity to make rational decisions is a concept that challenges the dependent and child-like nature of young people. However, if we assume that childhood is a construct, and also consider alternative understandings of children, we might want to question if excluding children from the decision-making process is in fact in their best interest.

In assessing the validity of youth participation, scholars such as Limber and Kaufman (2002) remind us, that when children are provided with opportunities to express their feelings, it signals a respect for them as human beings, and correspondingly allows them to develop a greater sense of respect for themselves. Moreover, when it comes to social policy, it is quite clear that government decisions impact the lives of children. As noted by Stasiulis (2002), neo-liberal governance has resulted in the erosion of funding in areas such as education. While we would like to believe that adults will always act in the best interest of the child, it is quite easy for them to overlook how their policies impact young people when the voices of youth are excluded. Furthermore, it would be much easier to respond to the needs of children if adults were to listen to them. For example, in the educational context, decisions regarding curriculum are often made without any input from students. Perhaps if young people were given greater opportunities to influence such decisions, educators could build a curriculum that is more motivating for students (Johnny, 2005). This does not mean that young people should be granted equal power, because adults often have more experience and knowledge to draw upon. Therefore, it stands to reason that adults would be given a more central role in decision-making bodies. However, we must consider that our inclination to exclude the voices of children may underestimate their capacity to articulate their own needs and desires. Certainly, the UN Convention recognises this point as it provides a framework for re-conceptualising the role of children within society by providing them with the right to influence the decisions that impact their lives. Yet as experience has shown, the challenges associated with implementing this principle are numerous, especially in institutions such as schools that have traditionally operated as authoritative structures.

### **THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE VS. PROTECTIONIST SCHOOL POLICIES**

While human rights advocates widely agree that providing children with greater opportunities to participate is a more ethical way of treating young people, youth participation in schools is still wanting. For example, in the Canadian context scholars such as Howe and Covell (2000) have found schools possess few structures of opportunity that allow students to contribute to the decision-making process. Although it is true that some educational institutions provide student councils that allow youth to learn about democratic participation these councils are instituted at varying degrees and usually do not provide opportunities for students to make substantive decisions about the school (cited in Johnny, 2005). In America there are similar problems as students are provided with few individual rights in the school setting; their voices are often excluded on matters regarding curriculum and school rules and regulations are promulgated

without opportunities for student debate (Sudbury Valley School, 1970). Moreover, as noted by Hart (cited in John, 1995, p. 115) “there is no nation where the practice of democratic participation in schools has been broadly adopted. The most fundamental reason seems to be that, as primary socialising instrument of the state, schools are concerned with guaranteeing stability; and this is generally understood to mean preserving the very conservative systems of authority.” Indeed, in many cases, schools are not run as democratic structures, but rather they provide educational officials with the power to make decisions unilaterally.

When we consider the hierarchical nature of the school system, it is clear that the authoritative ideology that has propelled the operation of schools since the inception of mass schooling is still very much rooted within present-day practices. Based on this notion, we might conclude that the treatment of children in schools does not reflect contemporary understandings of children and their rights. Indeed, policies and laws, such as the UN Convention, can be drafted, but their implementation will not be effective unless we work toward restructuring the authoritative organisation of our educational institutions. Frequently when educators engage in dialogue about reform, the focus tends to be centred on curriculum and educational standards. Very little thought is given to the actual structure of operation in the school and the placement of student voices within it. Unquestionably, the initiation of such dialogue is often ignored because our tendency to view children as wholly dependent upon adults is deeply engrained within the history of western societies.

With this in mind, we might want to question not only how childhood is understood amongst teachers and other education officials but also how these perceptions are constructed. For instance, would it be beneficial to examine the extent to which teacher education programs reinforce a vulnerable image of childhood and how this might impact the power dynamics that are played out in the school? It would seem that such an understanding is crucial when we consider that teachers will ultimately hold the power to include the voices of children in the decision-making process. In other words, the manner in which teachers construct age, maturity and capability will largely influence the amount of power that they afford to young people (Smith, 2002). With international agreements such as the UN Convention, there is an urgent need for schools to create opportunities for youth participation because it is a fundamental and universally recognised right of children. Therefore, it is essential that we try to construct a more empowering image of childhood in our schools.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS**

In summary, our discussion shows that conceptions of childhood have transformed throughout the centuries. Although it is likely that childhood has always been regarded as a distinct stage in life, the image that is attributed to children has shifted according to social influences. The notion that children are vulnerable and dependent is largely a product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whereby people came to appreciate the natural goodness of children. This led to protectionist policies that sought to remove children from the adult world of work, and instead place them within the school environment. Mass schooling contributed to a universalised conception of childhood as it allowed the government to socialise all young people in a uniform manner. In many respects, the school has perhaps had the most profound influence on shaping our understanding of children. With its authoritative and orderly operation, the school was able to reinforce the dependent and vulnerable nature of young people.

While this ideology was challenged in the 1970s by child liberationists who sought to give children greater equality and autonomy, the school continued to operate as a hierarchical structure. In more recent years, the international community has also tried to provide children with more freedom with the implementation of the UN Convention and its participatory principle. However, child participation has been extremely difficult to implement and uphold, because many people



argue that children do not have the capacity to make rational decisions. Arguably, this ideology stems from the social construction of childhood that was developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, it is still apparent in schools where students are continually excluded from participating in the decision-making process. While teachers and other education officials often make decisions for children because it is believed that adults have more foresight, it should be noted that such actions are a violation of children's right to participate in the decisions that affect them. Indeed, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is calling upon educators to rethink their pedagogical strategies and school-based procedures. If we are to create an ethical educational system that respects the rights of children it is time to reinvent our understanding of childhood and provide children with greater opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes that take place in the school.

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